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SUBJECT: SULTAN MAKES RARE MISSTEP IN PROHIBITING PUBLIC

EID PRAYERS ON "WRONG" DATE

Classified By: Ambassador Gary A. Grappo for Reasons 1.4 (b, d)

¶1. (C) Summary: Despite public criticism of its decision to observe the start of the Eid al-Adha on December 9, one day later than the rest of the GCC, the government sent security officials into major mosques throughout Oman on December 8 to enforce official circulars prohibiting the early start of Eid prayers. Why Sultan Qaboos, who perhaps retains a more absolute grip on power than any Gulf ruler, chose to authorize such a heavy-handed undertaking is unknown. End Summary.

¶2. (SBU) To the surprise of many Omanis, the government announced in early December that the Muslim holiday of Eid al-Adha would commence on December 9, rather than on December 8 as observed by the rest of the GCC and most Muslim-majority countries. In bucking the regional trend, the government stated adamantly that its official "Moon Sighting Committee" had used valid astronomical and scientific criteria in determining its "well-founded decision."

¶3. (C) The government's decision immediately became the subject of widespread discussion among Omanis, including in on-line fora and blogs. Many Omanis criticized the government for contravening the large majority of Muslim countries regarding the beginning of the Eid; several pointed out that the Moon Sighting Committee was comprised only of Ibadhi Muslims. (Note: While there are no official figures or estimates, many observers believe that little more than 50% of Omanis adhere to the Ibadhi school of Islam, which nevertheless dominates the Ministry of Awqaf and Religious Affairs. Sunni Muslims may represent 45% of the total native population and the vast majority of Omanis in the southern Dhofar region. End Note.)

¶4. (C) In response to public criticism, the government had both the Council of Ministers and the Majlis al-Shura (the directly elected lower house of Oman's bicameral advisory body) issues statements affirming the "accuracy" of its determination of the start of the Eid. This did little to persuade Omanis, however, as neither body is recognized as having real authority to speak on religious matters. Contacts report that several members of the Majlis al-Shura refused to back the government's decision, but that the Majlis Chairman nevertheless signed the statement on behalf of the entire chamber anyway due to government pressure. (Note: The government earlier directed the Majlis al-Shura to denounce the State Department's Trafficking in Persons (TIP) report on Oman despite the fact that most members had probably never read the document. End Note.)

¶5. (C) Perhaps aware that some Omanis, particularly those who live close to the Oman-UAE border, planned to observe the start of the Eid on December 8, the government issued two official circulars to enforce its declared start date for the holiday. The second circular (a copy of which was obtained by post) was published on December 7 and sent to all tribal sheikhs and rasheeds (community leaders) in Oman, ordering them to conduct Eid prayers only on December 9. The circular stated that this directive came from Sultan Qaboos directly

and that "anyone who prays on a different date, despite being advised, shall be subject to legal actions taken by the Royal Oman Police."

¶6. (C) According to contacts, security officials and representatives of the Ministry of Awqaf and Religious Affairs entered major mosques throughout the Sultanate the morning of December 8 and warned imams and those gathered there not to conduct Eid prayers. At least one imam in Dhofar was reportedly detained for defying the government's Eid directive, but was later released. (Note: Popular discontent with the Eid edict and the government's enforcement of it is especially pronounced in the highly Sunni governorate of Dhofar. End Note.) Interestingly, several sources observed that attendance for Eid prayers the morning of the following day (December 9) was significantly down from prior years in at least several parts of the country, including the capital. Judging from the active discussion taking place in chat rooms and elsewhere, public dissatisfaction related to this subject appears widespread and not specific to any one sect.

¶7. (C) Comment: In addition to being unprecedented, this episode helps illustrate the iron grip on power exercised by Sultan Qaboos in Oman. While the Sultan usually wields his authority lightly, especially on religious matters, his decision to strictly enforce the local start of the Eid in defiance of religious authorities in Saudi Arabia and public criticism shows how heavy-handed he can be if he so chooses. Perhaps no other ruler in the region would have attempted this same move. This, of course, begs the question of why the Sultan would go to such great lengths to dictate local

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observance of the Eid. Some have speculated that his decision was in response to pleas from Ibadhi leaders who wish to assert Oman's distinct religious identity. No one, however, can answer this question definitively except the Sultan himself. End Comment.  
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